Y7: Revisions of "Heaven & Hell"

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Visions of Heaven and Hell was a three-part documentary broadcast in the UK in 1994, which examined and extrapolated social changes brought about by new technologies, but also touched on wider themes of biotechnology, virtual reality, population density and pandemics. The series is particularly notable for its cast of interviewees, featuring appearances from Tilda Swinton (in the form of a proto-ASMR narration); William Gibson, Stephen Hawking, Douglas Adams, Bill Gates, David Byrne and Nick Land. It is the fleeting appearance of Land in particular that brought the show cult status amongst certain terminally online subcultures, evidenced by the fact that whilst episodes of *Visions* uploaded to YouTube have amassed 22k views, the 45-second clip of Land's sole appearance has been viewed 145k times.

The cult genealogies and typologies stemming from the CCRU have been consistent sources of influence on our practice, and as such we were initially compelled to watch *Visions* purely on the basis of the lore of Land's cameo, but the series soon became a central reference for us in its own right. Its scope, ambition and artistry subverts the expectations we might have of a contemporary programme with a similar purview; that is, a triptych of 1-hour video essays—to be broadcast on mainstream television—speculating on the future through a technological-determinist lens. Whilst plenty of these will exist in some form or other on BreadTube, it is hard to imagine such a series

being aired on Netflix or Prime with the budget (and subsequent line-up of respondents), artistic license and intellectual freedom that was afforded to the creators of the original.

Visions manages to subvert expectations on other fronts, too. The episodes are couched in a visual and sonic language that does not rely on the usual tropes of futurity. The soundtrack is largely ambient and orchestral; there are few, if any, bleep-bloops or wider techsthetics, Swinton's narration is lulling and melodic, and the cinematography deploys hypnotic B-roll footage of cities, crowds, clubs, traffic and industry, often abstracted through a modulation of playback speed in the manner of Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi*. All of these techniques amount to a feeling of a beguiled, sedated eye being cast upon the future through abstractions of the present, avoiding the inescapable retrofuturist simulacra one might expect of mainstream endeavours in futurology.

Overall, the predictions and insights of *Visions* are prescient: from the narrated proclamation of a drive towards cultural consumption over production, to Charles Handy's hypothesis of the rise of a technocratic class of '*Symbolic Analysts*'—a term originally coined by Robert Reich—in an assessment that is at times harmoniously antecedental to Caroline Busta's 'Hallucinating Sense' text. Predictably, there are also some takes that are lost in the sauce of freebased Web1 cyberpunk speculation, and—somewhat understandably—the long shadow of The End of History does darken the horizons of the possible, as evidenced by the sentiments of the opening narration.

We were keen to speak to the people who worked on the series; to tap into the thought processes that led to its creation and to gauge how their visions of the future have shifted over the last 30 years. Those who know Nick Land dissuaded us from contacting him—retrospection, we were told, was not something that would remotely appeal to him. Somewhat fittingly we were also told by her office that Leanne Klein—Co-Producer-Director of *Visions* and the conductor of Land's interview—was unavailable for comment. What follows instead is excerpts from interviews conducted with Co-Producer-Director Mark Harrison and Director of Photography Tony Miller, alongside transcribed passages from the original series.

We often wonder what a 2025 reboot of *Visions* might look like; who it might feature, which topics would lend the most accurate insight into the vibe-of-now and which

would be best positioned to speculate on the future. The hardest tasks posed by a contemporary context Shumon Basar terms as *the new new normal*—in which *change itself keeps changing*—is establishing steady footholds of foresight quickly enough. *Visions* was born into a context of consensus-enforcing, centralised, linear media landscape that afforded it sustainable datum points that would ring as true in broadcast as they did in concept development. In contrast, the meta trend of the present is that the trend cycle is accelerating so aggressively that discrete eras are motion blurred into a veritable catherine wheel of infoslop; an everything-now continuum of post-progress flux in which it's hard enough making sense of the present, let alone the future.

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Tilda Swinton (**1994**) There will be no Armageddon, there will be no sudden ending, we will see our children grow, and theirs grow after them. For 50 years, we awaited the future with a mounting sense of fear, our path to the next millennium seemed certain to be lit by the bright lights of a nuclear conflagration. But now we have almost made it to the year 2000, and our minds are no longer filled with sharp fear, but with something just as frightening; an aching sense of slow decline, of a world without direction. The future drifts out before us, inviting us to take control. We yearn to find a vision, to hold on to something strong to carry us ahead. But now voices can be heard, we have heard them many times before, but this time we so badly want to listen. They tell us 'Do not fear, we will not go empty-handed into the next 1000 years. There is something that we always carry, that we never can put down, that sometimes seems to lead us and other times to follow. Technology. Technology is with us.'

Mark Harrison (**2025**) The whole process was really unusual. In those days if you'd got a certain reputation as a director, a commissioner would call you in and say "would you like to make a film or a series about something?" The brief for *Visions* was—and bear in mind that this is in 1993, so it's very early––an 'end of the millennium' piece. That was the entire brief. I thought about it and it seemed that technology was in a really interesting place. So I went back with pretty much that. I really wasn't quite sure how we were going to do it, or who we should be speaking to. But the one thing I was clear about was that although it was going to be about technology, it wasn't going to be tech-y. It would be about the social impacts. So we weren't going to have lots of shots

of technology and not all the people we spoke to would be technologists, hence approaching David Byrne and people like that. Obviously getting Bill Gates was a huge thing. With him we made the bid and we were told, “okay, you will interview him at this time on this day, he won’t be late and he will give you 20 minutes” And so we had to work our whole schedule around just being there for that time.

Tony Miller (**2025**) I think a strong sense that we had whilst making *Visions* was *those who have and those who don't*, and how that gap would get greater and greater. I remember seeing the enormous wealth in Singapore and then going to the garbage dumps in the Philippines where these kids were, and we filmed a boy—about 11 years old—and he looked almost ashamed. He's about 11 years old, and there was a sense of shame. My attitude as a photographer was to try and underscore things emotionally, because ultimately this is about *people*. Even though *Visions* was about the internet being this democratising force—which it hasn't turned out to be—the job was to bring out human emotion.

Tilda Swinton (**1994**) Though we are told we all can travel on the information highway, the reality is more pedestrian, more familiar and cold. Most of us will just receive, we will passively consume, because we do not have the power, the knowledge or the means to move into the fast lane, to join the ones who shape the new.

Mark Harrison (**2025**) I was clear from the outset that I wanted Tilda to narrate it, so I was likely writing for her voice. I've never been—apart from a bit of William Gibson—a science fiction reader, for instance, my references are more like Philip Roth or the French existentialists: Camus and Sartre. Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Why Television Kills Rationality* was something that I had read and was being influenced by. Unsurprisingly—since I worked in television—I didn't actually agree with it, but it was still really influential.

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William Gibson (**1994**) *Cyberspace* is a word that I coined in 1981 without really knowing what it was going to mean. It seemed to me though that people working with computers were relating to a notional space that was not *within* the machine but somehow *beyond* the machine, and from that perception it's only a very short leap to the idea that all these notional spaces on individual computers might be connected.

The ATM at the bank is connected to a computer that keeps track of your money. The market no longer really occurs on the floor of exchanges, it occurs in this extra-geographical, near-instantaneous zone where we increasingly do so much of what passes for civilisation.

Neil Postman (**1994**) Information has become a form of garbage; it comes from dozens of sources, it's relentless. It's a commodity that can be bought and sold, it's not directed at anyone in particular. So we're now faced with the problem not of how to *get* information, but of how to *get rid* of information [to bring] some sort of coherence to our lives.

Faith Popcorn (**1994**) Our nerves are raw. Things are beeping and buzzing. We're trying to rest for a second and then—bing!—the fax machine. And if that wasn't enough, your email is here and you've got to answer everybody. We're sick of being so accessible. This email thing has just gone too far.

Charles Handy (**1994**) So this is a world made for a fortunate few: *the symbolic analysts* —people who can work with numbers and ideas, who live in leafy, isolated suburbs surrounded by spiked gates, who sit with their computers and telephones and deal with ideas and information all over the world. And then there'll be the rest who don't have access to this technology, who don't know how to make products out of it or how to find customers. This is the underclass, and unless we can raise them to be symbolic analysts we're going to have a divided society, with the rich not prepared to pay taxes to help the poor because they don't meet the poor, they live in two different worlds.

What people don't realise is what difference this technology is going to make to all the old power structures and authority systems in our society. Everybody [will be able to] make up their own minds about what is happening in America, Bosnia, or wherever. No longer do we have to believe presidents, prime ministers, princes or queens. As a result, the old authority structures no longer hold the same sway over people's minds. In some ways that's wonderful but in some ways it's frightening. What is going to hold society together now?

Will Hutton (**1994**) What's happening at the moment is you've got technological change superimposed upon massive deregulation of the labour market and the world of finance. It's that confluence which is transforming the structures in which we live.

Nick Land (**1994**) There is a very similar pattern that you find in the structure of societies, in the structure of companies and in the structure of computers. All three are moving in the same direction. That is, away from a top-down structure of a central command system giving the system instructions about how to behave, toward a system that is parallel, that is flat, which is a web and [through] which change moves from the bottom up. And this is going to happen across all institutions and technical devices; it's the way they work.

Mark Harrison (**2025**) I'm not aware of what's happened with Nick Land since. I mean, obviously he's emerged as quite a figure, and I know that he's controversial and that people take very contrasting positions on him, but that's all, really. Leanne Klein is the one who interviewed him and I'm pretty sure, if I remember rightly—and the fact there's only one small clip would bear this theory out—that the interview was a pretty weird one, like we really struggled to get anything from it.

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Mark Harrison (**2025**) The main visual reference, which I'm quite embarrassed by because it's a pretty direct borrowing, was *Koyaanisqatsi*. It was very special to me because it was the film that made me want to work in television. I was just completely blown away by the fact that you could make a film that could convey so much whilst having no commentary. I was aware that *Visions* was derivative. One or two people pulled me up for it at the time. Which is fair, because it was straight-up derivational.

Tony Miller (**2025**) I didn't think *Koyaanisqatsi* was very good! I think Mark brought that one up and I think me and Leanne felt slightly differently. We thought that *Koyaanisqatsi* was dislocated from human emotion. We instead wanted to try and get a sense of *the intimate and the epic*.

When we shot at Piccadilly Circus it was raining and horrible, but after a while we began to realise there was beauty in it. There were all of these billboards above us that were reminiscent of *Blade Runner*, which was a huge influence for me. They gave a sense of the vertical, of high, geometrical structures—like MC Escher. So for half an hour we shot the billboards and the Coca Cola signs and the reflections next to the Eros statue. Edward Hopper was a big influence on this too. You look at his paintings, and you think—there's a story happening outside of the frame.

Mark Harrison (**2025**) It's very hard to provide visuals for technology. It's like the whole cyberhacker thing, that it needs just the shadowy figure in a hoodie—I mean, for God's sake! But with *Visions* those clichés didn't exist yet. The way that a television series at that time would have visualised it would have been very head on, it literally would have had shots of computers sitting on desks. So the challenge was how to bring atmosphere around that and how to create a mood rather than just portraying something.

Tony Miller (**2025**) Leanne [Klein] and I had many plane rides together where we would talk about the nature of the internet, about what it could be, what the interviewers had said and about how we can bring it to life visually. We wanted to distort the reality of now to get an abstract picture of the future.

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Mark Harrison (**2025**) It's quite difficult to imagine this now because—especially since 2007, when the iPhone came out—we've lived with the idea of technology's potential for social change as an everyday thing. It's quite difficult to appreciate just how extraordinary it seemed for people to be talking about something like the internet in the early '90s. It was seen as potentially being the way that we would rediscover community and connection, and that it would empower people. I guess that that was right in the sense of how social media would become such a powerful force in popular uprisings in the following decades. But at the time there wasn't really much talk about whether it might quickly outgrow its initial applications as it became more widespread. And that's the bit that really interested me. I was thinking, well, if this thing is as important as people say, and it becomes something that is much more accessible, then what happens?

Tony Miller (**2025**) It was a snapshot of a certain point in time in the media landscape. It coincided with the birth of reality TV. I don't mean this arrogantly at all but a project like that—which got the top talent in London to make it—just wouldn't happen anymore. Making a project like *Visions* now would be a niche affair. People have less tolerance to watch long form things now, maybe they'd get bored with a new version of *Visions*. You might have to do it in a faster way.

Mark Harrison (**2025**) If I were to make it now I'd want to speak to clinicians; to people who work in insurance and finance, to people who work in factory design and automation. I'd want to explore the fact that behavioral dimensions of technology are now so much more important than the technology itself. What is it that triggers users to explore features and then use them in particular ways that then become so influential? The rise of TikTok happened in part via the way the users began to use its features, which won't have been necessarily in the way that TikTok imagined, just like nobody knew what the short messaging system would lead to. The way that consumers use AI systems is going to be transformative, but it almost certainly won't be the way that they're supposed to use them, because that's never how it works.

You look back at it and *Visions* actually called out a lot of things quite well, but didn't necessarily get the timing right, of course, because we always think that technology is going to have an impact more quickly than it does—we always underestimate the practical barriers to adoption.

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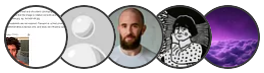

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